BURNED CHURCHES REBUILT IN TEXAS

Interracial Drive Restores Bombed Black Edifices

By HOMER BIGART
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TEXARKANA, Tex.—On a gusty March night in 1971, arsonists tried to destroy every black Baptist church in this city of 54,000 people. They burned two churches to the ground and their fire bombs caused slight damage to three other churches.

The local police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted a fruitless investigation. The arsonists are still at large. No suspect was detained. A $5,000 reward offered by the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce for information leading to the arrest of the arsonists expired Dec. 31, and the money was given to the congregations of the burned churches.

St. Paul's Church, rebuilt, was reopened on May 28. Singing "We Shall Overcome," the congregation marched in a light rain from the makeshift sanctuary in an elementary school to the handsome new edifice built of Colorado spruce logs. Almost as many whites as blacks attended the service. In an unusual show of racial harmony, the white community had contributed not only money but also labor to the rebuilding of St. Paul's.

"Our hands are blistered and our bodies are worn," the Rev. B. C. Green told the mixed assemblage. But he added, "We've all no malice or hatred."

To Reopen in July

The other burned church, Mount Orange, is in the final stage of reconstruction. Its pastor, the Rev. S. A. Stuckey, said it would reopen sometime in July.

Perhaps for fear of reprisal, leaders of the black community have been reluctant to speculate on the identity of the arsonists. But Mr. Green said in an interview that "no whites came under suspicion." Both he and Mr. Stuckey are apparently convinced that the arsonists were "black radicals," although Mr. Stuckey did not rule out the possibility that some whites had been involved.

The Baptist clergymen said they had incurred the wrath of black activists for refusing to open their churches as temporary classrooms when 126 black students were expelled from Texarkana High School in February, 1971.

They said they had refused because the old churches lacked proper facilities and because the children would not have been adequately supervised.

The expulsion of the black students stemmed, they said, from an incident arising out of racial tension at the high school. The blacks had demanded a black drum majorette. The demand was granted but then, according to Mr. Stuckey, the whites began heckling the blacks. One day there was a confrontation outside the schoolyard, and the pushing and scuffling resulted in the suspension of 126 blacks and about 30 whites.

At 1 A.M., March 6, 1971, the Mount Olive Baptist Church, a brick building, was set afire. Hampered by high winds, firemen were fighting a losing battle with the flames when, at 2 A.M., the rear of St. Paul's Church, a cinder-block edifice a mile away, was discovered ablaze. Both buildings were quickly reduced to rubble. Attempts to burn three other Baptist churches failed.

The Rev. Dr. L. Eugene Harris, pastor of the First Methodist Church, and another white clergyman, the Rev. Dr. Lory Hildreth, pastor of the First Baptist Church, headed a drive for funds that netted more than $24,000 toward the rebuilding of the burned churches.

But more heartening to black pastors than the cash donations—the money fell far short of the goal of $200,000—was the contribution of muscle by both races. The Red River Army Depot provided men and bulldozers to clear away the rubble of the two churches. White Boy Scouts and white adults worked side-by-side with blacks in the rebuilding of St. Paul's.

Responding to Mr. Green's call for volunteer labor, as many as 40 blacks and whites appeared at the site on weekends. While men were raising the log structure, women—food in the school cafeteria.

blacks and whites—prepared

Merchants supplied building materials at cost. An anonymous Rotarian gave $1,000 fo lighting fixtures. An Arkansa millionaire supplied a $90 piano. A Fort Worth engineering firm donated a baptistry Representative Wright Patman a member of the First Baptis Church, gave a substantial con tribution. A trucker from Ath ens, Tex., hauled the log down from Colorado and only charged for the gasoline.

Leaders of both races agree that the church burnings had brought an unexpected bene fit.

C 19